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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security*

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2274 (2016), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including significant humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my report of 10 June 2016 (A/70/924-S/2016/532). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events relating to Afghanistan.

II. Relevant developments

3. Increased tensions between the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, persistent security challenges and rising pressure from political opposition groups contributed to growing volatility. The Parliament confirmed two key appointments, for Minister of Defence and Director of National Security, ensuring a full roster of security-related cabinet officials for the first time since its establishment almost two years ago. Afghanistan secured international funding for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces through 2020. The security forces were heavily tested across the country amid ongoing clashes with the Taliban which generated civilian casualties at the highest level since the United Nations began systematic documentation in 2009 and fresh displacements. Meanwhile, the prospects for a possible peace process with the

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Taliban remained limited. The Government continued its preparations for the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, to be held on 5 October 2016, including the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework. Tangible gains were achieved in implementing the anti-corruption agenda.

A. Political developments

4. Tensions within the Government increased significantly during the reporting period. On 11 August, the Chief Executive publicly voiced criticisms of what he viewed as insufficient consultations by the President on key appointments and as incomplete implementation of the agreement establishing the National Unity Government. The appointments included that of the former Independent Election Commission Chair, Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani, as Ambassador to Spain, and that of the Presidential Senior Adviser on Strategic Communications, Nader Naderi, as head of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, announced on 9 July and 9 August, respectively. The two leaders met on 17 August in order for the concerns of the Chief Executive to be heard. Further meetings are expected.

5. Before the political rift between the President and the Chief Executive, the Government faced increasingly public challenges from political opposition leaders claiming that the agreement establishing the National Unity Government would expire in September 2016, two years after its signing on 21 September 2014 and absent electoral reforms, parliamentary and district council elections and the convening of a loya jirga to adopt constitutional amendments. They included the former President, Hamid Karzai, and a prominent member of the opposition Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council, Omar Daudzai, who both stressed the need for a loya jirga.

6. There were a number of public protests during the reporting period that drew the participation of opposition figures. On 22 July, a demonstration in Khost Province involved a reported 7,000 protestors, who called for the dissolution of the Government and the holding of a loya jirga to appoint a new one. On 23 July, ethnic Hazara demonstrated in the city of Kabul against the routing of an electricity infrastructure project. When the march was targeted by two suicide bombers, killing 73 civilians and injuring 293, the subsequent condolence ceremony on 25 July drew former President Karzai and several other former government officials. The site became an assembly point for those protesting against the Government. On 29 July, the leaders of the demonstration of 23 July issued a statement, pledging to hold further protests should their demands not be met by the Government.

7. There were protests from 27 July to 6 August in Faryab, Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces on issues relating to government performance, lack of security and official appointments. On 1 August, ethnic Tajik activists threatened to hold protests and stage a ceremonial reburial on 1 September of a Tajik leader who was briefly in power in 1929. The activists received support from the Chief Executive; the former Minister of the Interior, Zarar Ahmad Moqbel Osmani; and the acting Governor of Balkh Province, Mohammad Atta Nur.

8. Armed groups claiming association with government officials who have strong powerbases in the north, particularly those affiliated with the Junbish-i Milli and Jamiat-e Islami political parties, continued to contribute to insecurity. On 26 June, following accusations of human rights abuses in Faryab Province by militias

claiming loyalty to the Junbish-i Milli party. President Ghani ordered an investigation and instructed the Junbish leader, the First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, to halt his military operations and return to the city of Kabul.

9. Progress was made in senior appointments. On 20 June, the lower house of the National Assembly confirmed Masoom Stanekzai as Director of the National Directorate of Security and Abdullah Khan Habibi as Minister of Defence, providing the current Government with a full roster of security-focused cabinet officials for the first time. Important positions remain occupied by officials serving in an acting capacity, including the Minister of Mines and Petroleum, the head of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance and the governors of Balkh and Nuristan provinces.

10. President Ghani appointed several Presidential advisers in response to calls for more inclusive appointments. On 23 June, President Ghani appointed Farooq Wardak, former Minister for Education under former President Karzai, as Senior Adviser on Provincial Affairs, and on 28 July, Mohammad Almas Zahid, a parliamentarian from Parwan Province, as Senior Adviser on National Solidarity Affairs. On 2 August, Abu Hussain Yasir, leader of the People's Islamic Movement of Afghanistan political party, a predominantly Shia grouping, was appointed Presidential Adviser on security issues; while on 9 August, Hamidullah Farooqi, former Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation under former President Karzai, was appointed Chancellor of Kabul University. On 14 August, Ustad Abdul Halim, affiliated with the Afghan Protection and Stability Council, led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, was appointed as Presidential Adviser on tribal affairs.

11. There was incremental progress towards the electoral reforms that are to precede future elections, as provided for in the agreement establishing the National Unity Government. After a joint commission of the National Assembly failed to resolve disagreements over a decree concerning electoral management bodies which had been rejected on 13 June by the Lower House and approved on 28 June by the Upper House, the legislative body entered its summer recess on 21 July. With the status of the decree in question, the President and the Chief Executive met with members of the international community on 14 July and reiterated their commitment to implement electoral reforms and hold parliamentary and district council elections. In a letter of 31 July, the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution advised that the Government could issue a new decree without sending it to the National Assembly during the last year of the legislative term. The Government continued working on a draft decree whose issuance would enable some electoral reforms and preparations to move forward.

12. Prospects for talks between the Government and the Taliban remained very limited during the reporting period, as the new Taliban leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, concentrated efforts on consolidating his authority and on combat operations. There were no reports of significant dissent in the Taliban movement following the leadership change. In a speech marking the end of Ramadan on 6 July, the President called on the Taliban to join a peace and reconciliation process. On 14 July, an Afghan presidential spokesperson stated that there were no plans for a sixth meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Process, comprising Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States of America. Meanwhile, a Taliban delegation visited Chengdu, China, on 21 and 22 July.

13. Peace talks between the Afghan Government and Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin stalled, reportedly on such issues as the timeline for the withdrawal of foreign forces and guarantees of security and political representation for the group. In his Eid message on 3 July, the Hezb-i-Islami leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, stated that his fighters were instructed to act against Afghan security forces only in self-defence.

14. The High Peace Council made progress in developing its new structure and strategy, which it presented to the international community on 1 August. Consultation on the draft Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Strategy was undertaken with civil society representatives, including women's organizations, in furtherance of the Government's implementation of the Afghan national plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security. Donors agreed to extend the interim funding for the Council through the end of September.

15. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) facilitated several events in support of local peace initiatives during the reporting period. On 20 July in the city of Pul-e-Khumri in Baghlan Province, approximately 225 representatives from provincial government and civil society, as well as religious scholars from the districts, participated in a peace jirga convened by provincial authorities and supported by UNAMA. Participants resolved to work towards peace in their districts. On 9 August, UNAMA hosted a regional conference on the role of youth in the peace process, attended by 40 district youth representatives of Samangan, Balkh, Sari Pul and Jawzjan provinces. Participants adopted a declaration calling on the Government and the international community to involve youth in the peace process and to hold a national youth conference to discuss peace initiatives.

B. Security

16. The security situation remained highly volatile as intensive Taliban operations continued. Since the movement launched its spring offensive on 12 April, armed clashes have occurred at consistently high levels. During the reporting period, the Taliban focused their operations on challenging government control in key districts of Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar provinces in the north-eastern region, Faryab and Jawzjan provinces in the northern region and Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces in the southern region, including attempts to capture district administrative centres and cut key supply routes.

17. Between May and July, the number of armed clashes increased by 14.7 per cent as compared with the three previous months, and was 24 per cent higher than during the same period in 2015. After a slight decline around the Ramadan period, from 7 June to 6 July, the Taliban offensive regained momentum after 19 July, with the brief capture of the district administrative centres of Khanashin and Sangin (Helmand Province), Qush Tepa (Jawzjan Province), Dahanai Ghuri (Baghlan Province), Dasht-e Archi, Khanabad and Qala-i-Zal (Kunduz Province) and Khwaja Ghar (Takhar Province) and continuing pressure on the provincial capital of Helmand, Lashkar Gah. Although the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces regained control of most district centres, these locations remained under significant pressure, particularly in the south and north-east.

18. Between 20 May and 15 August, the United Nations recorded 5,996 security incidents across the country, representing a 4.7 per cent increase as compared with the same period in 2015 and a 3.6 per cent decrease against the same period in 2014. Consistent with previous trends, armed clashes accounted for the majority of security incidents, at 62.6 per cent, followed by those involving improvised explosive devices, at 17.3 per cent. The southern, south-eastern and eastern regions continued to account for the majority of security incidents in the country, with 68.1 per cent of the total incidents recorded during the period. Anti-Government elements also continued their asymmetric attacks, to exert influence through abductions, intimidation and assassinations. In total, from 20 May to 15 August, 268 assassinations, including 40 failed attempts, were recorded, representing a 6.2 per cent decrease against the same period in 2015. In addition, 109 abductions were recorded across the country during the reporting period, including 15 mass abductions. Suicide attacks decreased from 26 to 17 as compared with the same period in 2015. High-profile attacks in Kabul continued, including the attack of 23 July against Hazara protesters, for which Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) claimed responsibility. The Taliban condemned the attack. On 1 August, the Taliban claimed responsibility for a complex attack against an international compound housing foreign contractors. The three attackers and a police officer were killed.

19. At the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Summit in Warsaw, Poland, on 8 and 9 July, NATO members and Resolute Support Mission contributors formalized agreement on the continued presence of the Mission in Afghanistan beyond 2016 under its current structure. At the Summit, the President and the Chief Executive undertook a commitment that the Government would assume financial responsibility for its security forces by 2024 and continue implementation of its reform agenda, including combating corruption and the protection of civilians. NATO members, as well as Japan and the Republic of Korea, affirmed their commitment to continuing financial contributions to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces until the end of 2020. The Summit outcome was welcomed by Afghan political leaders. On 6 July, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, announced his decision to maintain 8,400 United States troops in the country into January 2017. This superseded an earlier plan to reduce this figure to 5,500 by the end of 2016. In June, President Obama authorized revised rules of engagement, allowing United States troops to provide more direct support to the Afghan security forces and broaden the use of air strikes, including against the Taliban.

20. The Afghan security forces made some progress in further increasing their air capacity, and operations in Kunduz demonstrated greater tactical flexibility, even though significant shortcomings persisted in the areas of command and control, leadership and logistics. Reports have pointed to increasing casualties among security forces since June, particularly those killed in action. Questions about sustainability continued to be raised, in the light of the high attrition rates. Recruitment remained on target, but re-enlistment and retention remain low and need to be increased to compensate for the losses incurred through casualties and desertion. In July, Afghan National Army troop levels and Afghan National Police numbers reached 86.6 per cent and 94 per cent, respectively, of projected levels. Despite ongoing efforts to strengthen the operational capacity of the Afghan security

forces, they continued to rely on special forces and international military forces for reinforcement.

21. In addition to the conflict between Afghan security forces and the Taliban, violence continued with other armed anti-Government groups on Afghan territory, including ISIL-KP. Since my last report, the Afghan security forces have increased ground and air operations, supported by international military assets, against ISIL-KP in Nangarhar Province. Reportedly, these operations have resulted in significant casualties among ISIL-KP fighters, including the death of its leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan, on 26 July, and a further reduced presence of the group in the province. Some of the dislodged ISIL-KP fighters were reported to have gone to Kunar Province.

22. Notwithstanding the consolidation of Haibatullah Akhundzada's leadership of the Taliban, armed clashes resumed in Shindand District of Herat Province in early July between two local commanders affiliated with Akhundzada and Mullah Rasool, reportedly resulting in the killing of several Taliban members, and continued throughout early August.

23. During the reporting period, 14 recorded incidents were either directly or indirectly against the United Nations. These included six cases of intimidation and seven crime-related incidents which mainly affected Afghan staff members.

C. Regional cooperation

24. Since my previous report, limited prospects for peace talks with the Taliban, the status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and border tensions have continued to affect relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Pakistani authorities remained committed to the implementation of their procedures at the Torkham crossing point, as of 1 June allowing only Afghans with visas to cross. From 12 to 14 June, border forces exchanged fire at Torkham after Pakistan began installing a gate in what both countries consider their territory. In total, four border force personnel were killed and 40 wounded, and the crossing point was closed. After diplomatic exchanges, the two countries announced a ceasefire on 15 June and agreed on 24 June to establish a high-level coordination mechanism to prevent cross-border clashes, which met in the city of Kabul on 26 July. When Pakistan completed construction at the Torkham crossing point on 1 August, the Government of Afghanistan denounced the works. Tensions increased again on 19 August, when the Pakistani authorities closed the Chaman crossing point in Kandahar Province, on the grounds that Afghan border forces had failed to prevent attacks against the gate by Afghan protesters. Meanwhile, political opposition figures and protestors increased pressure on the Government of Afghanistan regarding its policy towards Pakistan.

25. Regional engagement on infrastructure and connectivity projects continued during the reporting period. On 4 June, President Ghani and the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, inaugurated the Indian-financed Salma Dam and committed to turning the city of Herat into a regional transport hub. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, made visits to Afghanistan to discuss the planned Herat-Torghundi railway and to announce funding for the Aqina-Andkhoy railway. On 2 and 3 July, the President of Afghanistan visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and the Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defence, Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud.

26. Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran increased their engagement during the reporting period, following their trilateral agreement of 23 May with India, centred on the Iranian port of Chabahar. The Islamic Republic of Iran hosted a meeting of governors of border provinces of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran in Mashhad on 25 and 26 July to discuss security and new trade opportunities involving the port. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hekmat Karzai, visited Tehran on 3 August for discussions on trade, infrastructure and the presence of Afghan nationals in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The National Security Adviser, Hanif Atmar, visited the Islamic Republic of Iran on 6 and 7 August to discuss border security and countering violent extremism. After a four-year interval, the fifth Afghanistan-Islamic Republic of Iran Joint Economic Commission was held on 10 August in Tehran.

27. Security and economic cooperation featured in discussions between Afghanistan, Central Asian countries, China and the Russian Federation. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Tashkent, on 23 and 24 June, Heads of State emphasized the importance for the region of peace and stability in Afghanistan. President Ghani called on countries in the region to join Afghanistan in fighting terrorism and to agree on regional cooperation mechanisms. The National Security Adviser visited the Russian Federation from 25 to 27 July to discuss cooperation against the threat of terrorism and security assistance. He also visited Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on 10 and 12 August to discuss security issues.

28. China initiated a Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism to counter terrorism involving Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. At the inaugural meeting of 3 August, hosted by China, the countries agreed to increase coordination and information-sharing, including on border management.

III. Human rights

29. On 25 July, UNAMA released its midyear report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict in Afghanistan covering the period from 1 January to 30 June. UNAMA documented 5,166 civilian casualties (1,601 deaths and 3,565 injured), reflecting a 4 per cent increase as compared with the same period in 2015. This represents the highest number of civilian casualties recorded by UNAMA in a midyear report since 2009. The casualty figures include 507 women (130 deaths and 377 injured), an 11 per cent decrease as compared with the same period in 2015. Child casualties increased significantly, by 18 per cent, to 1,509 (388 deaths and 1,121 injured), primarily as a result of ground engagements and unexploded ordnance. The Mission attributed 60 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-Government elements, 23 per cent to pro-Government forces (of which 20 per cent to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, 2 per cent to pro-Government armed groups and 1 per cent to international military forces) and 13 per cent to crossfire between anti-Government elements and pro-Government forces which could not be attributed to a single party. Four per cent of civilian casualties were attributed to explosive remnants of war. Ground engagements remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, accounting for 1,972 casualties (459 deaths and 1,423 injured), followed by complex and suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices. In response to the report, the Office of the President issued a statement emphasizing its commitment to the protection of civilians and

stating that the Government had finalized its national policy on civilian casualty mitigation, which would soon enter into force.

30. Large-scale attacks by Taliban and anti-Government elements in civilian-populated areas and attacks directed at civilians continued. On 20 June, the Taliban claimed responsibility for a suicide attack targeting a vehicle transporting private security contractors in the city of Kabul, killing 15 civilians and injuring 7 others. On 30 June, a suicide attack against a convoy carrying Afghan National Police cadets in the city of Kabul killed 34 civilians and injured 79. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

31. Between 1 April and 30 June, the country task force on monitoring and reporting documented and verified 399 incidents that resulted in the killing of 213 children (150 boys, 60 girls and three undetermined) and the injury of 600 others (395 boys, 203 girls and two undetermined). Ground engagements were the leading cause of child casualties, with 436 casualties (54 per cent of all casualties), followed by improvised explosive devices, with 123 child casualties (15 per cent of all casualties). Explosive remnants of war were the third most frequent cause of child casualties, with 95 casualties (12 per cent of all child casualties). Aerial attacks led to 51 child casualties (6 per cent of all casualties), including 42 attributed to the Afghan National Army and 9 to international military forces. The task force attributed the remaining 108 child casualties to a number of tactics, including targeted killings and suicide and complex attacks.

32. The task force attributed the largest number of child casualties (39 per cent), including 212 casualties attributed to the Taliban, to anti-Government elements, followed by pro-Government forces (36 per cent of child casualties). Four child casualties were attributed to Pakistan military forces owing to cross-border shelling. The remaining 203 casualties could not be attributed to any party to the conflict. Of the remaining violations, the United Nations verified seven incidents targeting education facilities; eight targeting health facilities; one incident of abduction involving one boy; and four incidents of denial of humanitarian access. During the reporting period, the United Nations received reports of the widespread use of children in combat by the Taliban in Badakhshan Province. As a consequence, 100 to 120 households reportedly left the area, citing fear of the Taliban recruiting their children as one of the reasons for moving. From June to August, the Ministry of the Interior opened six new child protection units in police recruitment centres in Bamyan, Sari Pul, Jawzjan, Samangan, Kunar and Laghman provinces, bringing the total number of such units to 13 countrywide.

33. During the reporting period, the ministries of the Interior and Education and the National Directorate of Security issued directives to strengthen the protection of children. On 18 June, the Ministry of the Interior issued a directive prohibiting media exposure of children arrested on national security charges. On 4 June and 4 July, the Ministry of Education sent two directives to all security-related ministries highlighting the commitment of Afghanistan to the Safe Schools Declaration and requesting security forces to stop using schools for military purposes. On 2 July, the National Directorate of Security issued a directive stopping the transfer to and facilitating the release of children from adult detention facilities, including the maximum security Detention Facility in Parwan Province, near the city of Kabul.

34. The Government continued its efforts to address violence against women and girls. On 11 June, the Government approved the strategy and the action plan on the elimination of violence against women for the period 2016-2020. On 26 July, the Head of the Department of Women's Affairs in the city of Ghazni was attacked by unknown assailants.

35. On 17 July, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission published its annual report on child marriage, documenting 235 cases of girls married between March 2015 and March 2016. This represents a 4 per cent increase as compared with the previous year. The report proposed a range of corrective actions in line with the existing legal framework for the protection of girls.

36. During the reporting period, UNAMA documented the executions of two women accused of "moral crimes" by anti-Government elements in Samangan and Sari Pul provinces in northern Afghanistan on 16 July and 1 August, respectively. In Takhar Province in June, attempts by anti-Government elements to implement stoning sentences on one woman were averted after an intervention by elders. Since the beginning of 2016, UNAMA has documented seven instances of parallel justice punishments, resulting in the execution of four women and the physical punishment of three women by anti-Government elements.

37. The United Nations continued to raise awareness of women's rights and provide direct support services to women. From 20 July to 10 August, the United Nations organized round tables on women's rights in Baghlan, Herat, Khost, Paktika and Zabul provinces, which reached over 300 Afghans, including 180 women, and televised debates. The United Nations continued to support 11 women's protection centres and 5 family guidance centres for survivors of domestic violence in 13 provinces. The Under-Secretary-General/Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, visited the city of Kabul from 18 to 21 July and met with the President and the Chief Executive.

38. On 15 June, the upper house of the National Assembly confirmed the prior rejection by the lower house of the presidential decree of 2 September 2015 on preventive detention, citing the rights to due process and liberty secured by the Constitution. Other parts of the presidential decree were approved, including provisions extending pretrial detention periods for individuals arrested on security-related offences.

39. In response to a request by the Ministry of Justice, UNAMA completed its countrywide assessment of juvenile rehabilitation centres in relation to the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (the Havana Rules). While there has been progress in the last decade, it was indicated in the report that further improvements were required, such as increasing the number of State juvenile rehabilitation centres.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and the coordination of development assistance

40. Afghanistan continued to face challenges resulting from, inter alia, the 2014 transition and slow economic growth. At the above-mentioned NATO Summit held in Warsaw in July, Donors renewed commitments to the security sector, but World

Bank and International Monetary Fund analyses have underscored consistently since 2012 that Afghan security expenditures will become unsustainable over time, absent increased revenues from economic growth and expenditure consolidation, particularly in the security sector.

41. On 20 July, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund approved a three-year extended credit facility arrangement for Afghanistan valued at $45 million. The economic programme under the facility is aimed to help catalyse additional donor support and to support national policies for economic growth. After Parliament ratified the accession treaty on 22 June, Afghanistan gained full membership of the World Trade Organization on 29 July.

42. Government preparations for the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan continued, with a second draft of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework released to development partners for comments on 30 July. Their feedback focused on issues including macroeconomic projections, sectoral priorities and the importance of addressing population displacement in government development plans. The Government has committed itself to tabling a completed draft of the framework at a special meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board on 4 September.

43. In August, the Government began a preliminary presentation of sectoral development plans, including the Citizen's Charter model for service delivery, agriculture, urban development, women's economic empowerment and infrastructure, to donor representatives in advance of the Brussels Conference. Discussions also began on the Government's proposals for refreshing deliverables under the Self Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework for 2017-2018, with both Government and development partners aiming to ensure that deliverables are clearly linked to the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework. On 31 July, civil society networks launched a series of national and subnational consultations to map concerns and inform a position paper for the Brussels Conference.

44. The Government increased efforts to implement its anti-corruption agenda. On 30 June, the Government issued a presidential decree establishing a specialized court to deal with corruption cases, the Anti-Corruption Criminal Justice Centre. On 28 July, the President chaired the first meeting of the High Council on Governance, Justice and Anti-Corruption. At the meeting, the High Council approved the Supreme Court's recommendations relating to the national jurisdiction of the Centre's courts, which will extend to major corruption cases committed in all provinces involving senior officials or substantial monetary losses of a minimum of 5 million afghanis (approximately $73,000).

45. Developments were reported in the land reform process. On 12 July, the Chief Executive Officer of the Afghanistan Land Authority announced that the approval process for private investors leasing State-owned land had been streamlined from 52 administrative steps to 9. As a result, processing time went from several months to several weeks, and land lease revenues increased from $140,000 to $3.4 million. The UNAMA report, "Water Rights: An Assessment of Afghanistan's Legal Framework Governing Water for Agriculture" containing recommendations for dispute resolution mechanisms, was shared with the Ministry of Energy and Water and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock.

46. The revision of the subnational governance policy, one of the Government's short-term commitments under the Self Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework, continued. During the reporting period, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance organized a series of provincial consultations on the revised draft of the subnational governance policy in 30 of the 34 provinces. This is to be followed by discussions with line ministries, civil society and international partners before submission of the revised draft to the President and Cabinet for approval. The Government also continued to implement its public service reform agenda. The President appointed six municipal mayors in August through a competitive process, bringing the total number of competitively appointed mayors to 21 out of 33 in 2016 or 154 in total.

47. The Government continued its efforts to professionalize the Afghan National Police. Ministry of the Interior officials worked during the reporting period to strengthen the Ministry's strategic plan, with international support, including that of UNAMA. On 31 July, the International Police Coordination Board approved the outline for a detailed action plan to address key gaps in the areas of police leadership, training, command and control, and monitoring and evaluation of programme implementation. The United Nations continued to provide technical support to promote a gender-sensitive security sector reform. In May and June, UNAMA met with 314 female Afghan National Police members, representing some 10 per cent of the female police corps, as well as Afghan National Police officials in 19 of the 34 provinces, to assess progress. Gaps were identified in the protection of female police officers, particularly with regard to workplace harassment and the implementation of gender policies at the district level. On 11 July, the Ministry of the Interior established a complaint mechanism to prevent and respond to sexual harassment against women police. To increase the number of women police officers, the Ministry provided training to 91 women Afghan National Police members in Turkey.

V. Humanitarian assistance

48. The humanitarian situation remained of concern, with significant new conflict-induced internal displacements exacerbated by continuing access challenges. The vulnerability of rural communities was further exacerbated by continued displacements, persistently high levels of malnutrition and limited access to health care.

49. As at 14 August, the United Nations had recorded 211,246 newly internally displaced persons since January 2016 in 29 of the 34 provinces, a 6.6 per cent decrease as compared with the same period in 2015. At least 48,068 people have been newly displaced since the beginning of June. Over half of the new displacements were reported in the three provinces of Badakhshan, Helmand and Takhar. In Nangarhar Province, 3,306 people have been displaced in the last two months as a result of escalating air operations by government and international forces against ISIL-KP. In Helmand Province, increased clashes around the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah have resulted in the displacement of over 15,000 people to date. The United Nations and non-governmental organizations provided humanitarian assistance, including cash, food and non-food items, to the displaced populations. Access constraints and difficulties in determining accurate displacement figures continue to hinder the humanitarian response.

50. Displaced populations remain extremely vulnerable, particularly communities which have been displaced for prolonged periods or repeatedly. Food insecurity, limited access to basic services, particularly health care and adequate water and sanitation, further exacerbate health and malnutrition concerns. Recent assessments of displaced populations across Afghanistan found emergency levels of severe acute malnutrition among children under 5 years of age. Some of the provinces that reported the highest levels of displacements, including Helmand and Uruzgan, were already experiencing difficulties in meeting the existing needs of 170,000 children identified as requiring treatment for malnutrition due to limited service coverage.

51. The number of refugees returning through the United Nations voluntary repatriation programme has increased substantially since July, after remaining very low between January and June. As at 30 June, 7,804 refugees had been repatriated, including 6,875 from Pakistan and 852 from the Islamic Republic of Iran. The figures for returnees, particularly those from Pakistan, have increased by 450 per cent in the first six weeks since 1 July. By 15 August, a total of 42,472 Afghans had returned from Pakistan under the voluntary repatriation programme since 2002, while 1,560 had returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 100 from other countries. The increase is attributed to enhanced reintegration support by the United Nations, including an increase in the individual repatriation grant from $150 to $350, as well as uncertainties over the status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan beyond the end of 2016 and reduced acceptance by host communities and local authorities.

52. Deportation and returns of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan have also increased substantially since 1 July as compared with the first six months of the year, whereas they remained steady from the Islamic Republic of Iran. This follows a 25 per cent decrease in the deportation and returns of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran between 1 January and 30 June as compared with the same period in 2015. The 253,041 undocumented Afghans included 138,768 spontaneous returns (116,123 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 22,645 from Pakistan) and 114,273 deportations (99,649 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 14,624 from Pakistan). Numbers have peaked since July, with a total of 29,135 returns and deportations from Pakistan in July and 35,000 in the first two weeks of August. Returnees cited increased policing and uncertainty over their status in Pakistan, including a fear of eviction, as the main reasons for leaving.

53. On 29 June, the Government of Pakistan extended the validity of Afghan refugees' proof of registration cards until the end of 2016, one day before they were to expire. At a Tripartite Commission meeting in Islamabad on 19 July, the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan and the United Nations extended the tripartite agreement governing the repatriation of Afghan citizens in Pakistan. The three parties reiterated their commitment to finding sustainable solutions for Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan and their support for voluntary repatriation in conditions of safety and dignity.

54. Afghan migration to Europe continued at a slower pace as compared with 2015. Since the beginning of the year, 44,699 Afghans have arrived in Europe by sea, representing 17 per cent of arrivals, down from the June figure of 21 per cent. The International Organization for Migration assisted 4,527 voluntary returnees, of whom 79 per cent were men, from Europe between January and July, compared with 764 in the same period in 2015. Almost half the returnees had come from Germany, even though increasing numbers from Greece and Turkey were reported. Most

returned to Herat and Balkh provinces and the city of Kabul. Returnee numbers continued to increase during the second quarter of the year, with 2,639 returnees assisted, compared with 1,400 during the first quarter.

55. Efforts to eradicate polio, which remains endemic in Afghanistan, faced renewed access and security challenges. One new polio case was identified during the reporting period in Kunar Province, bringing the total number of new polio cases in Afghanistan in 2016 to six. The number of children who could not be vaccinated increased to 320,000 during the reporting period, up from 200,000 during the previous period. This includes an estimated 157,857 children in Kunduz Province, where active fighting was under way, and 76,284 in Nangarhar Province, where anti-Government elements prevented access. Quality monitoring of the vaccination campaigns in Farah, Helmand and Kandahar provinces remained limited because of insecurity, while threats of bans on vaccination campaigns continue in several key provinces, including Kandahar and Helmand.

56. Humanitarian access constraints continue to be recorded under the United Nations global monitoring frameworks, primarily associated with insecurity in the eastern, southern and northern parts of the country. In total, 45 incidents against non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and other international organizations were registered between 1 May and 31 July, compared with 75 for the first four months of the year. Five aid workers were killed and five injured during the period compared with five killed and ten injured during the previous period. Abductions for the year to date reflect 2015 trends, with 93 aid workers abducted during 2016. The period from 1 May to 31 July showed a sharp reduction, with 12 aid workers abducted compared with 81 during the first four months of 2016.

57. Mine action partners, coordinated by the United Nations, cleared 39 minefields, one battlefield and three firing ranges between 1 May and 31 July, with the result that 12 communities were declared mine-free. It is estimated that 4,005 minefields, 330 battlefield and 62 firing ranges remain, affecting 1,589 communities, along with a continued threat from pressure-plate improvised explosive devices.

58. As at 10 August, overall humanitarian funding for Afghanistan stood at $277 million, of which $122 million was designated for activities envisaged in the 2016 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan and $157 million for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. As at 10 August, the 2016 Plan was 31 per cent funded. The common humanitarian fund in Afghanistan has received $44.2 million to date in 2016, with funding focused on emergency health care, assistance to displaced families and humanitarian assessments. On 30 July, the United Nations humanitarian country team endorsed the strategic objectives developed by its Gender in Humanitarian Action Task Force on minimum standards of gender mainstreaming.

VI. Counter-narcotics

59. During the reporting period, the summer poppy crop harvest ended, with initial indications of an increase both in areas under cultivation and in opium production. In Helmand Province, the Taliban offensive increased significantly following the completion of the poppy harvest. Opium also continued to be a valuable source of insurgent funding. Eradication efforts in Afghanistan during the growing season

were the lowest reported in the last decade, due to security challenges, particularly in Helmand Province. Eight members of the Afghan security forces were killed and seven injured in the course of eradication operations.

60. Between 24 May and 17 August, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted 325 counter-narcotics operations, resulting in the seizure of 375 kg of heroin, 267 kg of morphine, 2,163 kg of opium, 6.41 kg of methamphetamine, 487 kg of hashish, 2,341 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 1,628 litres of liquid precursor chemicals. In addition, 403 suspects were arrested and 63 vehicles, 53 weapons and 56 mobile telephones seized. One member of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces was killed and one wounded in the course of those operations.

61. From 19 to 20 July, law enforcement officials from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre, the International Narcotics Control Board and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime met in Tashkent for the ninth session of the Regional Intelligence Working Group on Precursors to review recent developments on precursor trafficking and identify next steps. Participants emphasized the need for strengthened information-sharing through regional bodies, including the Coordination Centre. Participants also discussed extending membership to other regional bodies, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. They also agreed to further measures aimed at identifying and intercepting consignments of chemicals smuggled into the region for use in the illicit manufacture of heroin.

VII. Mission support

62. UNAMA completed the construction of its new premises in the city of Kunduz, including residential facilities and works to ensure compliance with minimum operating security standards. Redeployment of international staff to the city of Kunduz commenced on 8 August. Between 1 June and 31 July, UNAMA conducted 180 road and 140 air missions, as well as 350 reverse outreach missions during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

63. In recent months, the Government has focused on addressing security and economic challenges, including steps toward countering corruption, as well as preparations for the critical forthcoming Brussels conference on Afghanistan. However, the political rifts in recent weeks have strained the unity of the Government. United, strong leadership will be essential in addressing the complex security, economic and development challenges that face the nation. I call on the country's leaders to demonstrate a spirit of cooperation and achieve meaningful agreement on the path forward, for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan.

64. A number of prominent Afghans have publicly voiced concern about the course being taken by the Government. I encourage them to adopt a more constructive engagement in this regard, in order to enhance and support the capacity

of the Government to implement effective reforms. I call upon all leaders to rise above their political differences and act in the interests of the nation.

65. This constructive approach is crucial in the face of an intensifying conflict. The security situation in Afghanistan remains complex, with persistently high levels of armed clashes and suicide attacks, including the attack of 23 July against a demonstration by ethnic Hazaras, claimed by ISIL-KP, which was the deadliest single incident recorded by the United Nations in Afghanistan since 2001. The increasing rates of civilian deaths and injuries, together with ongoing displacement, entail the continuous erosion of the human rights of women, men and children, in particular the rights to life and physical integrity, access to education and freedom of movement. I once again urge all parties to take action to mitigate the impact of conflict upon the population. The Taliban must uphold international humanitarian law. After the announcement of its national policy on civilian casualty mitigation and the accompanying action plan, it will be important for the Government to move forward with the implementation of the plan.

66. Despite progress in the development of a normative framework, insecurity and entrenched discrimination continued to block the full enjoyment of rights, particularly by women, resulting in violence and restrictions on their role in public life. The targeted attack against the Head of the Department of Women's Affairs in the city of Ghazni on 26 July by unknown assailants demonstrated the significant threats faced by prominent women working in public life.

67. The scope and intensity of the conflict and the need to provide key enablers to the Afghan security forces were recognized in the decisions at the above-mentioned NATO Summit to extend the presence of the Resolute Support Mission and on financing for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. The finalization of appointments for all security-related ministries is a welcome development. Continued efforts will be required to address the sustainability of the security sector and to address major issues of capacity, morale and internal cohesion. I continue to be concerned by any move to utilize irregular armed forces. A lack of accountability and oversight can do more harm than good, and risks undermining government legitimacy and the rule of law.

68. In advance of the forthcoming Brussels Conference, the Government has taken steps to strengthen institutions to counter corruption, which is crucial for the confidence of the Afghan population and donors. The first meeting of the High Council on Governance, Justice and Anti-Corruption and the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre were important first steps toward greater accountability and increasing public trust. This is a systematic and complex undertaking which must follow due process. In the field of elections, there is a need to accelerate progress on reforms and preparations for upcoming electoral cycles.

69. The decision by the upper house of the National Assembly to reject the preventive detention article in the presidential decree of 2 September 2015 is a welcome development. It is hoped that the Government will also amend the provisions of the decree relating to the extension of the pretrial detention period to ensure compliance with the Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

70. Security and political stability will be a prerequisite for economic growth, in particular to expand opportunities in the agricultural sector. Economic growth will

also depend on the implementation of a legal and regulatory framework that encourages investment, private sector engagement and access to basic services. The consultations with civil society and the development of plans on the Citizen's Charter model in advance of the Brussels Conference are encouraging, in recognition of the crucial role of communities in achieving development outcomes. The meaningful participation of Afghan women in both preparing and implementing the Brussels agenda will be essential to its full realization.

71. 2016 has witnessed large numbers of people displaced as a result of conflict. I remain concerned about the capacity of the Government of Afghanistan to ensure their safety and welfare. If their needs are to be fully assessed and met, greater access, security and funding will be required. I urge all countries in the region and beyond to ensure that the return process for Afghan refugees is voluntary, safe and dignified, taking into consideration the current context of Afghanistan.

72. In the longer term, the support of countries in the region is essential for economic growth in Afghanistan, as well as for addressing issues of peace and security. The multiple infrastructure initiatives under way will boost prospects for trade and exchange and reflect common interests in future prosperity. Regional frameworks for ensuring stability and advancing dialogue have an important role to play. The reporting period has seen particular challenges in the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. I urge the leadership of both countries to work together to overcome the difficulties and rebuild confidence. I support outreach under the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process to build collaboration in countering the threat of transnational terrorism, whose defeat requires a coordinated, regional approach.

73. The overriding imperative remains peace. I regret that the Taliban did not accept the call by the President in his Ramadan statement to join a peace process. The United Nations continues to engage with all parties and stands ready to provide support. Creating conditions conducive for peace will require a determined and unified Afghan leadership. I encourage Member States to facilitate stability in Afghanistan, including the exercise of such influence as may be possible on the Taliban, to help lay the groundwork for direct talks with the Government.

74. I thank all the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfil our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan.